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ABSTRACT

Families and schools are equal partners in the education of children, with both contributing in major ways. To succeed, their partnerships must be based on mutual trust and respect, with educators taking the lead in developing and nurturing effective collaboration with families. Overcoming barriers to partnerships means focusing on context, complexity, centrality, consistency, communication, and collaboration. Partnership principles include creating an open and friendly environment for parents, communicating with parents, and forging partnerships with all families. Trust building with parents involves predictability, dependability, and faith on the part of schools. Taking action to build trust involves focusing on such issues as: equal partnerships, power and social inequalities, cultural continuity, informal social events, and communication. Interacting with families requires maintaining a positive, honest orientation to all communication, ensuring that parents have all necessary information, and recognizing that trust takes time. The process of communication is influenced by dimensions of family-centered practice, including family orientation, positiveness, sensitivity, responsiveness, friendliness, and child and community skills. This paper includes a communications checklist, an action plan for strengthening home-school partnerships, and a sheet to help teachers examine what their partnership program will look like. (SM)

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Beyond Academics:
Home-School Collaboration to Promote Health & Learning

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School-Family Partnerships:

"The sustained mutual collaboration, support, and participation of school staff and families at home or at the school site in activities and efforts that directly and positively affect the success of children's learning and progress in school. The partners need to be treated as equals because both parents and educators contribute in major ways to the education of young people. To succeed the partnership must be based upon mutual trust and respect with educators taking the lead to develop and nurture effective collaboration with families."

Moles, O.C. (1993). *Building School-Family Partnerships for Learning.* Washington, DC: Office for Educational Research and Improvement (p.T3)

Overcoming Barriers by Establishing Connections: The "C's" of Constructive Connections

Context	Centrality	Communication
Complexity	Consistency	Collaboration

Christenson, S.L., & Godber, Y. (in press). *Enhancing Constructive Family-School Connections.*

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Partnership Principles

- Every aspect of the school building and general climate is open, helpful, and friendly to parents.
- Communications with parents – whether about school policies and programs or about their own children —are frequent, clear, and two way.
- Parents are treated by teachers as collaborators in the educational process. Parents' own knowledge, expertise, and resources are valued as essential to their children's success in school.
- The school recognizes its responsibility to forge a partnership with all families in the schools, not simply those most easily available.
- The school principal and other administrators actively express in words and deeds the philosophy of partnership with all families.
- The school encourages volunteer support and help from all parents by providing a wide variety of volunteer options including those that can be done from home and during non-work hours.
- The school provides opportunities for parents to meet their needs for information, advice, and peer support.
- Parents' views and expertise are sought in developing policies and solving school-wide problems; in some schools parents are given important decision-making responsibilities as a policy level.
- Schools recognize that they can best help parents provide a home environment conducive to children's learning if they facilitate their access to basic and supportive services.

Ooms, T., & Hara, S. (1991). *The family-school partnership: A critical component of school reform.* Washington, DC: The Family Impact Seminar.

Trust-building with Parents

TRUST: "confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared." (Deutsch, 1973)

One must put oneself in a position of **RISK** in order to trust.

Trust is not likely to be found in new relationships, because there are few past behaviors on which to base the trust.

Three Levels of Trust:

(Holmes & Rempel, 1989)

Predictability:

Based on the consistency of recurrent behavior and the stability of the social environment.
Trust is established when we observe a person repeatedly behaving in the way we expect.
Occurs through observing other people's behavior.
When a person's behavior is unexpected or inconsistent, trust is lost.

Dependability:

Trust is seen as a characteristic of the person rather than based on specific behaviors.
Occurs after a person has shown that his/her behavior is predictable and consistently meets our needs.

Faith:

A belief that a person will behave in ways that will meet our needs.
People who trust at the faith level must go beyond the available evidence to believe that the person is trustworthy.
Trust without "proof."

As TRUST level increases, RISK increases.

- A paradox: in order for trust to develop, one must take the risk that the other is not trustworthy.
- Trust is built gradually through repeated interactions involving the potential for rejection.
- Time and emotional investment also increase as trust level increases.

How to Build Trust: Action Steps

Many families face barriers to trust that must be addressed before families and professionals can work together.

Equal Partners:

- Some parents may have had negative experiences with schools and other social service agencies. They may feel intimidated and mistrustful.
- When educators and care workers give up some of their "professionalism" and recognize families' knowledge about their children, some of parents' fears may be overcome.

Power and Social Inequalities:

- Institutions, such as schools, possess a level of power in society, which may be felt by families.
- When a child is having school or health-related problems, parents may experience low self-esteem and helplessness about their ability to address the problems.
- Follow an Enabling Model of support to families:
  - The person being helped is seen as capable of addressing the important issues.
  - Look at parents' strengths and assist parents to see those strengths.
  - Create opportunities for parents to demonstrate their good parenting skills.
  - Emphasis is on building skills rather than on treating problems or preventing negative outcomes.

Cultural Continuity:

- Often, parents and school staff come from different ethnic, cultural, and/or income backgrounds.
- Creating an environment that recognizes and values different cultures and communities by learning key phrases in a family's language, displaying cultural artwork and history, and respecting cultural mores can help increase trust.

Informal Social Events:

- Talk with parents in an informal setting about "regular stuff."
- Hold informal "ice cream socials" or other events where staff and parents can get to know one another.

Communication:

- Talk with parents about their children's and their own personal strengths. Tell parents about what you like.
- When working with parents and their children, share information back and forth. Ask parents to tell you about their children, their likes and dislikes, what is challenging about parenting their children, etc.

Guidelines for Interacting with Families: "The What" and "The How"

The What

Maintain a positive, honest orientation to all communication.

- *Involve parents*: Make contact when a concern arises; call at the first sign of a concern. Invite parent ideas for addressing the concern. Keep parents informed.
- *Use nonblaming language:* There are no problematic individuals (parents, teachers, or students), only a problematic situation that requires the attention of the student, home, and school–all for the benefit of the student. Provide a realistic but optimistic message.
- Emphasize student progress and improvement toward goals and solutions, not problems. A *solution-oriented approach*:
  - Focuses on solutions by identifying what is working already; looking for exceptions to the behavior; underscoring strengths, resources, and abilities of parents, teachers, and students; and focusing on what is possible.
  - Uses different language: Speak of concerns, goals, and possible solutions, not problems, deficits or deficiencies; reframe a school-based concern as a learning goal (what the child needs to learn, what we want to teach the child)
  - Describes behaviors; does not label them.
  - Guides and shows parents different ways to support their child's engagement with schooling and learning; avoid simply telling parents what to do.
- *Maintain an optimistic perspective:*
  - Parents and teachers together can foster student engagement with learning and schooling
  - Keep the focus on encouraging development of student competence (i.e., a more successful adaptation to the demands of the environment and skill acquisition for students).
  - Persistence, ongoing sharing of information and resources, and solution-oriented problem solving are necessary to engage some students in learning.
  - Use "can-do" winning attitudes.

Ensure that parents have the information they need to support their children's schooling and learning. We need to:

- Invite parent assistance and explain why parents are essential to children's engagement with learning. This is the *informal education piece:* value education, encourage student participation, support learning and schooling (e.g., homework completion), and set personal future goals.
- Explain school policies and practices.
- Encourage parents to gather information from school personnel, question school procedures, and engage in structured problem solving with school personnel to create a better action plan for the student. **SOLVE** may be helpful here:
  - **S** Share thoughts, feelings, needs
  - **O** Obtain a list of possible solutions
  - **L** Locate the best solution (one that satisfies mutual needs)
  - **V** Validate the solution by implementing the plan
  - **E** Evaluate the plan and modify as needed
- Help parents see that there are many ways they can foster their children's engagement with schooling and learning. Share the ways and ask parents to select the one that works best for them. Invite parent participation and explain the importance of parents to children's interest and performance in school, but do not mandate how parents are involved. Provide options and value parents' contributions.

Recognize that trusting relationships take time.

The How

The process of communication is influenced by dimensions of family-centered practice, which is defined as: "a friendly, respectful partnership with families that provides (a) emotional and educational supports, (b) opportunities to participate in service delivery and to make decisions, and (c) activities to enhance family members' capacities to carry out their self-determined roles" (From: McWilliam, R.A., Tocci, L., & Harbin, G.L. (1998). Family-centered services: Service providers' discourse and behavior. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 18, 206-221). The dimensions include:

- **Family Orientation: Opening the Door**
  A willingness to orient services to the whole family, rather than just to the child. Providers must establish enough trust with parents to be able to ask them about their own concerns.
- **Positiveness: Thinking the Best of Families**
  Positiveness is a philosophy of thinking the best about parents without passing judgment. Similar to "unconditional positive regard." Characterized by a belief in parents' abilities, a nonjudgmental mind-set, an optimistic view of children's development, and an enthusiasm for working with families.
- **Sensitivity: In the Parents' Shoes**
  An ability to recognize and understand families' concerns, needs, and priorities. It is the idea of putting oneself in the parent's position in order to anticipate how families might feel as opposed to pre-judging families or thinking for them.
- **Responsiveness: Doing Whatever Needs to Be Done**
  Two forms of responsiveness include paying attention and taking action when parents express a need (e.g., for information, for support) or complaint. Incorporates an individualized and flexible approach to service provision.
- **Friendliness: Treating Parents as Friends**
  Being a "professional friend" entails developing a reciprocal relationship, building trust, taking time to talk to parents about their concerns, listening to parents, encouraging them, offering practical help, and conveying caring for both parents and child.
- **Child and Community Skills: Being a Resource**
  This dimension includes child-level skills (e.g., having knowledge about helping children become engaged with school and learning) and community-level skills (awareness of economic/cultural climate, familiarity with community resources, and a willingness to collaborate).

Adapted from a handout from a presentation on April 13, 1999, by Dr. Sandra L. Christenson (chris002@tc.umn.edu) for the Virginia Department of Education.

COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST

Directions: This worksheet is designed to help you evaluate the frequency, quality, content, and distribution of your school's written communication. In each square (if appropriate to that item) put a "+" for above average, a "0" for average, a "-" for below average. This quick check method will help you see strengths and areas in need of improvement. Add other communications not listed or criteria you feel are important.

Written Communications	Frequent	Easy to Read	Neat and Attractive	Encourages Responses	Important Information	Focus on Academics	Timely Distribution	Adequate Distribution	Translations Needed	
Letters Home										
School Policies										
-discipline code										
-homework policy										
-health regulations										
-absences/tardies										
Course Requirements										
Meeting Notices										
Progress Notes										
Success Reports										
School Newsletters										
Class Newsletters										
Classwork										
Parent Surveys										
Learning Objectives										
Assignment or Activity Calendars										
Handbooks										
Classroom Policies										

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10 From: Chrispeels, Boruta, M., + Daugherty, M. (1988). Communicating with parents. San Diego County Office of Education. 11

COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST

Directions: This worksheet is designed to help you evaluate the notification, preparation, content, and quality of face-to-face communications with parents. In each square (if appropriate to that item) put a "+" for above average, a "0" for average, a "-" for below average. This quick check method will help you see strengths and areas in need of improvement. Add other communications not listed or criteria you feel are important.

Face-to-Face Oral Communications	Early Publicity	Multiple Methods of Notification	Adequate Preparation	Clear Purpose for Meetings or Contact	Agenda of Questions to Aid Preparation	Childcare	Translators Required	Helpful to Parents	Focus on Child	Attendance Goal
Classroom Orientations										
Back-to-School Nights										
Open Houses										
Parent Education Meetings										
Parent-Teacher Conferences										
Telephone Conferences										
Evenings with the Principal										
Coffee Klatches										
Home Visits										
Community Breakfasts										
Potluck Suppers										
Special Events										
Presentations to Community Groups										

What Will Your Partnership Program Look Like When Your VISION Becomes a Reality?

When your school has a full-fledged home-school partnership program in place to support student success:

How will parents, students, and school staff relate and interact with each other?

What kinds of programs and activities will be in place?

What will teachers and the school be prepared to do to assist and work with parents?

What will parents be prepared to do to assist and work with the school staff:

How will people "see" your vision in action?

From: Chrispeels, J., Boruta, M., & Daugherty, M. (1988). Communicating with Parents. San Diego County Office of Education.

ACTION PLAN FOR STRENGTHENING HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Area of Focus: HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS

Activities:

What Will Be Done	Purpose of the Activity	By Whom	When	Resources/ Training Needs	Evidence of Success